

A Great Monster of the Deep in Massachusetts

By Anne Donovan, CZM

Black eyes the size of a dinner plate search through the gloom 2,000 feet below. Eight 10-foot-long arms, covered with two rows of toothed suckers, gently sway. Two immense feeding tentacles, 35-feet long, perch, ready to strike. The huge, sharp, parrot-like beak remains slightly ajar in anticipation of a meal. Reaching a conservative estimate of 60 feet in length and weighing nearly a ton, this creature is truly a monster of the deep. The world's largest invertebrate—*Architeuthis dux*—the giant squid. Despite extensive undertakings, it has never been seen alive in its natural deep-water environment, but we know it's out there. One even visited our very shores, washing up on Plum Island in 1980.

Only the third giant squid ever found in U.S. waters, what remains of this nine-foot, 440-pound specimen has a place

of honor in the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC. Even pickled in a glass tank that looks more like a tomb, this visitor from the deep gives an impressive glimpse into what's down there, currently beyond the reach of science and almost beyond imagination. When alive, this young female probably reached 20-feet in length, only a third of its potential size. With her complex brain and huge eyes, she sought out her prey, mainly fish and other squid, likely living out her life at a depth of 660 to 2,300 feet before some unknown event took her life and brought her to shore.

The giant squid is the stuff of legends. A prey item of the sperm whale, these monster invertebrates are known to put up a fight with these massive predators. In 1965, the crew of a Soviet whaler claimed to have witnessed a 40-ton sperm whale embattled with a giant squid. Although the squid didn't exactly win, neither did the whale. The whale was found floating, dead and strangled, the tentacles of the giant squid still wrapped around its body. The head of the squid was found in the whale's stomach.

Even more bizarre is the alleged encounter of a giant squid with the

Unlike its little cousin pictured here, the giant squid has never been photographed alive.



What becomes a legend? Stamps from around the world commemorate the giant squid.

Brunswick, a 15,000-ton auxiliary tanker owned by the Royal Norwegian Navy. In the 1930s, a giant squid is said to have attacked the vessel at least three times. Perhaps mistaking the vessel for its arch enemy, the sperm whale, the deliberate squid pulled alongside the ship, kept pace with its movement, and then suddenly wrapped its tentacles around the hull. The squid didn't win this battle either. Unable to get a good grip, it ultimately slid off into the ships propellers.

Reality or really big fish stories? Although the most prominent giant squid scientists consider such tales more fancy than fact, two things are known with scientific certainty. The beaks of giant squid are frequently found in the stomachs of sperm whales, proving that these giant predators dine on this giant prey. Sperm whales have also been found with 2-inch tentacle scars on their skin, demonstrating beyond a shadow of a doubt that giant squid can and will put up a fight.

Overall, not much is known about these clearly amazing sea creatures. Because of the specimens found in fishermen's nets and washed up on shore, scientists are certain that giant squid live in all oceans of the world. The actual depth they live at, how they feed and reproduce, and even how old they get is still a mystery, however. But the search continues . . .

For more on the giant squid, check out these Web sites:

- ♦ http://seawifs.gsfc.nasa.gov/OCEAN_PLANET/HTML/squid_opening.html
- ♦ <http://partners.si.edu/squid/>

Giant squid suckers are approximately 2 inches across.

